

NOTE

Beef-Eating in Ancient India

BEEF-EATING was not peculiar to the people of the Western countries alone, but was popular with the Vedic Indians also. The food items of the Vedic Indian can be gathered from the list of sacrificial victims because what man ate he usually presented to his gods.¹ Practically all the important ceremonies and sacrifices were attended with slaughter of bulls and cows. The *Gomedha* and *Asvamedha* sacrifices are important in this respect. The *Sulagava* sacrifice, in which the bull, as the name implies, seems to have been pierced with a spike or lance to appease Rudra, is described in detail in the *grhyasutras*.

Restrictions in Vedic Literature

In a hymn of the *Rgveda* it is said that "Indra will eat thy bulls."² In another hymn of the *Rgveda*³ Agni is styled *Uksanna* and *Vasanna* i.e. "eater of bulls and barren cows." Not only for the purpose of sacrifices but for food also, the bovine species were killed in regular slaughter-houses and this is evident from another hymn of the *Rgveda*.⁴ Again, it is suggested in the *Rgveda* that the cow was cut up with a sword or axe.⁵ It is interesting to note in this context that the modern Hindu practice of *Jhatka-bali*, that is, severing the head of the animal at one stroke, had not yet come into fashion. There are ample evidences how the *Rgvedic* people were fond of beef-eating. Even in funeral ceremony beef-eating was considered an essential part.⁶

Interestingly enough in the same Veda the cow is sometimes considered inviolable as indicated by her designation *aghnya* ('not to be slain') which occurs sixteen times in the entire *Rgveda*,⁷ as opposed to three instances of *aghnya*⁸ (masculine). But this fact cannot be regarded as showing that beef-eating was condemned in the *Rgvedic* period. In this connection, we should point out that the Sanskrit word used for the sacrificial cow is *Vasa* (i.e. 'sterile cow') and a milch cow was seldom sacrificed.⁹ It is only in this way that one can explain the lavish praise bestowed on

the cow in the *Rgveda* where she is described in a number of hymns as "the mother of Rudras, the daughter of the vasus, the sister of Adityas, and the centre of nectar."¹⁰

Although we have three references of *aghnya* in the *Rgveda*, still apparently no strict restriction in regard to the slaughter of bulls (as opposed to milch cows) is found. It seems probable that some composers of *Rgvedic* hymns were pre-Aryan (non-Aryan) Indians (who disliked beef-eating) who became Aryanized like the Asuras and the Vratyas and labelled the whole bovine species inviolable, because outside India this inviolability is utterly unknown.¹¹

In the days of *Atharva Veda* beef-eating remained unaltered, although it was censured here and there in that *Veda*. During the *Brahmana* period the habit of beef-eating seems to have increased. Among the *Kamya Ishtis* or minor sacrifices set forth in the *Taittiriya Brahmana* different bovine species were sacrificed to different gods, namely, a dwarf ox to Visnu, a drooping horned bull with a blaze on the forehead to Indra, a red cow to Rudra, a white barren cow to Surya and so on. The *Aitareya Brahmana* lists the bull as one of the sacrificial animals.¹² From the *Taittiriya* and the *Pancavimsa Brahmanas* we learn that the sage Agastya slaughtered hundred bulls at a sacrifice.¹³ The *Satapatha Brahmana* gives a picture of the inordinate fondness of Yajnavalkya for beef who said: "I for one eat it, provided it is tender (*amsala*)"¹⁴ But, strangely enough, we are to face two exhortations in the same *Brahmana* against eating beef.¹⁵

Among the *Sutras*, *kalpasutra* and *grhyasutra*, display less reticence and distinctly suggest beef as an item of food on different occasions of life. According to *Sankhyayana-sutra* a bull or a sterile cow should be killed in the house of the father of the bride on the wedding day and also in the house of the bridegroom when the husband and the wife arrive after marriage.¹⁶ Even at *sraddhas* or periodical oblations to the manes, the sacrifice of a bull or cow is recommended by the *Apastamba* and *Paraskara grhyasutras*.¹⁷ Yajnavalkya indicates how the aroma of beef was thought to be an ailment for the spirits.¹⁸ According to *Vasistha-sutra* "an ascetic who, invited to dine at a sacrifice . . . rejects meat shall go to hell for as many years as the slaughtered beast has hairs."¹⁹ The *Khadira* and *Gobhila-Sutras* prescribed the sacrifice of a black cow to the deity of the dwelling-houses when a new house was constructed.²⁰

Distinguished guests like one's teachers, priests, kings, bridegrooms and Vedic students on their return home after the com-

pletion of their studies are to be honoured with the presentation of a bull or a barren cow to be slaughtered – hence, a guest is denominated in the Vedic literature as *goghna* or cow-killer.²¹ The ceremony of *madhuparka* is notable in this context. The *madhuparka* ceremony seems to have been very old because the custom of entertaining a distinguished guest with beef is found both in the *Satapatha Brahmana*²² and the *Aitareya Brahmana*²³ and it was in all likelihood known also in the *Rgvedic* period.

Moral Codes and Beef-eating

We now turn to the *Smṛti* literature. Manu, like Vasistha, sanctions the consumption of the flesh of all domestic animals which have but one row of teeth.²⁴ That this would obviously include beef becomes clear from the comments of even such orthodox pundits like Medhatithi and Raghavananda.²⁵ Manu also recommends the *madhuparka* with beef for the reception of kings.²⁶ The *Yajñavalkya-smṛti* distinctly lays down that a *mah-okṣa* or 'big bull' is to be slaughtered on such occasions.²⁷ In fact, both the *Manu* and *Yajñavalkya-smṛtis* permit the killing of bovine species on such special occasions, in sacrifices and in rites for manes etc.; otherwise beef-eating was regarded as *upapataka* or minor offence, though not *mahapataka* or mortal sin.²⁸ In spite of the individual predilections of the author of *Manu-smṛti*, who was a staunch upholder of *ahimsa*, who even said that no flesh can be had without killing living beings and killing such beings cannot lead to heaven and so one should give up flesh eating,²⁹ the general usage was different in his times and centuries were required before the views propounded by Manu became predominant.³⁰

From Ancient Science and Literature

The ancient medical works like the *Charaka Saṃhita* recommend beef for pregnant women, but prohibits it for everyday use for everybody.³¹ R L Mitra enlightens us that in some medieval Indian medical works beef soup is especially recommended for people recovering from fainting fits.³²

The Epics allude to the *gomedha* without any details. In the 'Vanaparva' of the *Mahabharata*³³ it is stated that animals killed in sacrifices to the accompaniment of *Vedic mantras* went to heaven and it narrates the story of king Rantideva in whose sacrifices two thousand animals, including cows, were killed every day. In the 'Udyogaparva' king Nahusha was cursed and hurled down from heaven by the great sage Agastya because he ventured to cast doubts on the Vedic injunctions for the sacrifice of cows and

offered insult to a Brahmana.³⁴

Bhavabhuti in his *Uttara-Rama-Charita* (Act IV) describes how the venerable poet Valmiki, when preparing to receive the sage Vasistha, slaughtered a number of calves for the entertainment of his guest. From the *Mahaviracharita* of the same author it is evident how Vasistha, in his turn, likewise entertained Visva-mitra, Janaka, Satanaanda and other sages with 'fatted calf', and tempted Jamadagnya by saying: "The heifer is ready for sacrifice and the food is cooked in ghee."³⁵

In Kautilya's *Arthashastra* cattle are classified, where bulls are intended for the slaughter-house, but the killing of the milch cows, and calves, though permitted for sacrificial purposes, is forbidden for butchers' stalls.³⁶

Asoka in his Rock Edict I and Pillar Edict I declared how originally thousands of animals were killed in the royal kitchen. Considering the popularity of beef-eating among the people even Asoka, the great propagator of *ahimsa*, resolved later on to discontinue the slaughter of animals only for some days in the year; for example, he included the breeding bull but not the cow in the list of animals not to be slaughtered on those days.³⁷

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¹ A A Macdonell and A B Keith, *Vedic Index*, Varanasi, 1958, Vol II, p 147.

² *Rgveda* X 85, 13-14.

³ *Ibid.*, VIII 43, 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, X 89, 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, X 79, 6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, X 16, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I 164, 27 and 40, IV 16, V 83, 2, VIII 69, 21, X 87, 16 etc.

⁸ A A Macdonell *Vedic Mythology*, Delhi, 1974, p 151.

⁹ D R Bhandarkar *Some Aspects of Ancient Indian Culture*, Madras.

¹⁰ *Rgveda* VI 28, 1-8, VIII 101, 15-16.

¹¹ D R Bhandarkar *op. cit.*, p 73.

¹² *Aitareya Brahmana* VI 8.

¹³ *Taittiriya Brahmana* II 7, 11/1; *Pancanjanva Brahmana* XXI/14, 5.

¹⁴ *Satapatha Brahmana* III 1, 2, 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, I 2 3, 6-9.

¹⁶ *Sankhyayana-sutra* I 12, 10.

¹⁷ *Apstamba* II 7, 16-26; *Paraskara* III 10, 41-49.

¹⁸ *Tanvanalkya* I 258-60.

¹⁹ *Vajisistha* XI 34.

²⁰ *Khadira* IV 2, 17. *Gobhila* IV 7, 27.

- ²¹ *Asiatic Researches* VII p 289; according to *Panini* (III 4 73): *gam hantilasmai goghno*.
- ²² *Satapatha* III 4 1 2.
- ²³ *Aitareya* I 3 4.
- ²⁴ *Manu-Smṛti* V 18.
- ²⁵ D R Bhandarkar *Op. cit.*, p 77.
- ²⁶ *Manu-smṛti* III 119-20.
- ²⁷ *Yajñavalkya smṛti* I 109-10.
- ²⁸ *Manu* V 27-44, XI 60; *Yajñavalkya* I 109-10.
- ²⁹ *Manu* V 48.
- ³⁰ P V Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, 1941, Poona. pp 779-80.
- ³¹ R L Mitra, *Indo-Aryans*, Calcutta, 1881, p 360.
- ³² *Loc. cit.*
- ³³ *Mahabharata* 208, 11-12.
- ³⁴ E W Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, New Delhi, 1960, p 19.
- ³⁵ R L Mitra *op. cit.*, pp 357-58.
- ³⁶ *Arthasastra* II 26, 29.
- ³⁷ *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, VII, p 249; R L Mitra *op. cit.*, p 359.